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ABSTRACT

The author emphasizes the importance of imagination in literature for children and suggests that teachers can use books of fantasy and fiction in teaching emotional and creative responses as well as concepts and facts. In particular, the author discusses teaching about temporal and spatial relationships and explains how imaginative books combined with appropriate questioning from the teacher can help the child understand and appreciate new information. He suggests that reading can be introduced to children for enjoyment and that enjoyment of books will lead children to ask questions and assistance of their teacher. References are included. (AL)

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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND THE LAND OF NOD

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Last summer when I was on vacation in Maine, I chanced to observe two young moppets, both around age four, busy at work on a beach. Bending over to pick up another piece of glass, a rather long-haired child muttered to her co-worker, "If only people would learn, we wouldn't have this problem. Pollution. Pollution. Pollution." She gave a deep sigh, bent over again, and picked up a broken bottle, bringing it to balance on the ragged heap of debris she clutched firmly in her arms. The she wattled slowly toward me, struggling to keep her collection intact.

When she passed by my blanket on her way to a disposal, I reminded her with good intentions, "Now, dear, be careful. Don't cut yourself."

The young child stopped, turned, and looked directly at me, apparently annoyed at my assumptions. "I'm not a dear, dum-dum," she retorted. "I'm a boy." And indeed, I took his word for it--a justifiable "put-down" by a young symbol maker. Not only had I assumed he was a girl because he had long hair, but I openly encroached upon his self-identity--his self-concept of masculinity--by calling him dear.

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What, then, do young children bring with them to the world of print—to those "mouthy" sounds we adults call words? Primarily they bring themselves, small but complex creatures, with a number of factors associated with "readiness." They bring their self-images, personalities, dispositions, and memories. They bring their backgrounds, interests, and their ability to speak a and listen, for these skills precede reading. They bring a sense of color and a sense of sound--potential for auditory discrimination, for visual perception, for carrying out directions. Thus, they bring past experiences in language and life. Teachers of reading, therefore, should capitalize upon the child's want and need to communicate with others as a basis of learning. Moreover, they should use the child's own language and thoughts as a means for teaching and sustaining concept development.

In his article "Of Time and the Child," David Elkind emphasizes that children's ideas about time are neither entirely innate nor entirely learned. Rather, he states that they are gradually constructed by the child in the course of his interactions with his environment. In addition, he suggests that educators assist the child in his development of concepts by teaching time, distance, and velocity together.

This writer in his work with second graders in Wilmington, Delaware, was surprised how his method of questioning them automatically resulted in the children's successful synthesis of

concepts dealing with spacial relationships. At the front of the room, the class could see a huge map of the United States. For the past two weeks, they had been studying "map reading" with their regular teacher. When I asked them if they could locate Delaware on the map, I had surmised they could--and they did. With a few leaving their seats, the rest soon followed, pointing tiny fingers upward toward "the First State."

Next, I asked if they could locate California. One happy cluster of smiling faces moved from right to left of the map, with the boy in the lead first to touch the tip of the Gold Coast. Then I asked, "How many miles away from our state of Delaware is the state of California?"

Disappointment set in. Eyes looked down, little mouths closed, and shoulders drooped. Then the guessing began.

"Fifty miles."

"No, one hundred."

"Five hundred!"

I interrupted by asking if any of them had ever gone with their parents to the beaches in Delaware. Yes, many had. Upon asking them which beaches, I used Rehoboth, the most commonly mentioned one, as the basis for my next question. "How long does it take your mother or father to drive from Wilmington to Rehoboth?"

A pause followed. A red-haired boy was the first to answer. "About two hours," he said quite definitely.

"Close enough," I thought. "And how <u>fast</u> does your mother or father drive?" I inquired further.

"Seventy miles an hour!" the same little boy belted out boastingly.

"Close enough," I thought again.

The next question was a most difficult one to ask second graders, and for that reason I did not expect a correct answer. "If this boy's father or mother drives seventy miles an hour, and if it takes two hours to reach Rehoboth after leaving Wilmington, how many miles away from our city is this beach?"

I waited for a response. None came. I repeated the question, this time more slowly. Again I waited....and waited. Finally a little voice broke the silence, saying all too softly, "One hundred and forty miles."

"Correct!" I belted out boastingly to their teacher, who beamed a pride-filled smile from the back of the room. And the lesson continued. We compared the length of Delaware to the length of the continent. Then we counted out aloud across the map, fitting as many Delawares as we could into one thousand miles, which brought us roughly to Iowa-Illinois state line. Finally, I sectioned off the "traveled" part of our country vertically with a yardstick and called upon the children's

perception for the next question. "If we have traveled about one thousand miles away from Delaware so far, about how many miles must we still go before we reach California?"

After visually comparing the distance traveled with the distance yet to be "journied," a little girl said, "About two thousand more."

"Good!" I responded quickly, following through with my final question. "Now, who can tell me the answer to a question I asked earlier. How many miles away from our state of Delaware is the state of California?"

"Three thousand miles," a number of them chirped out in unison.

"Close enough," I concluded aloud, ending that lesson for the day.

Whatever else teachers decide to do, they should give balance to the reading program. The teaching of literature should be considered along with exposition, for literature affords numerous insights and experiences about human conditions and behavior. A major contribution of any reading program must be to help youngsters find their own identity--who and what they are, and what they can become. A certain amount of bibliotherapy, then, must be employed. Thus, teachers must search for books close to the lives of the children they teach.

Moreover, within much children's literature there are themes

devoted to those very spacial relationships to which Elkind refers. Teachers who deal with time, distance, and velocity concepts in literature, however, must consider carefully the construction of a variety of questions for facilitating such concept attainment. Questions should call upon the child to list, to sequence, to compare or contrast, or to delineate causes and effects. In addition, questions should deal with different levels of cognition in reading, and within different literary selections.

In The Little Island, for example, Golden MacDonald and Leonard Weisgard relate time concepts to the magic of seasonal changes and growth, with a little kitten learning how a little island can be "a part of the world and a world of its own." Notice how the following quote from the book lends itself to a variety of levels and relationships in the construction of questions: "Nights and days came and passed and summer and winter and the sun and the wind and the rain."

Another literature book capable of helping children overcome confusion of time, place and size is Tree in a Trail, by Holling C. Holling. This book traces the growth of a cottontree from 1610 to 1834, from the protection of the struggling sapling by Indians to the conquering of the "lonely giant" by wind and lightening. Of course teachers could not expect very young children to read this book on their own; they could, nevertheless,

paraphrase in simple language the story of the tree's history and growth over a long period of time, helping children to develop and extend some of the concepts under consideration.

Similarly, Leonard W bberley combines time, distance, and velocity relationships in his science fantacy Journey to Untor. In this book seven people are transmuted to a distant planet, where they are visited by "manifestations of energy." Landing in a thinking forest, they begin their exploration, encountering a strange happening: They become separated by an accident or a Time-Plane. Three of them go off to "Time-Past," where planet people try to convince them that their memories of "Time-Future" cannot exist. This book, with good questions, can prick the imagination of the inquiring young mind.

Northrop Frye reminds teachers of reading at all levels that "in a modern democracy a citizen participates in society through his imagination." Today in children's literature, we have a number of imaginative books, often accompanied by outstanding illustrations. In Where the Wild Things Are, for example, a small boy is sent to bed for misbehavior. Using his imagination, the boy sails away to where the wild things are, and "they make him king of all wild things." But when the boy realizes where he is loved most of all, he returns home, where his supper is waiting--still hot.

Within such imaginative encounters, children extend and combine their cognitive, creative and critical resources, making full use of images, memories, feelings and intuitions. Such creative learning experiences offer youngsters a chance to transcend their own interests, to feel the needs and aspirations of others, to find new and happier relationships--to realize consequences of alternative actions.

At the age of thirty, Robert Lewis Stevenson re-entered the world of childhood and viewed it through the eyes of the small boy that he once was, a small boy dreaming in "the Land of Nod." His poem goes as follows:

From breakfast on through all the day
At home among my friends I stay;
But every night I go abroad
Afar into the Land of Nod.

All by myself I have to go.
With none to tell me what to do--
All alone beside the streams
And up the mountainsides of dreams.

The strangest things are there for me.
Both things to eat and things to see
And many frightening sights abroad
Till morning in the Land of Nod.

Try as I like to find the way,
I never can get back by day,
Nor can remember plain and clear
The curious music that I hear.

Like Stevenson, all children need a chance to dream. And if opportunities exist in reading for children to rearrange and combine imaginative responses of the self-made mental kind, to

organize and synthesize them, then they create new understanding--a very special experience.

In language, literature, and the young child's imaginative powers, we teachers can explore many classroom possibilities, offering children more opportunities to read for power. Much thought, indeed, must go into our preparation, selections of books, plans of strategy and purposeful replies to anticipated responses. But most kinds of reading can be introduced to children as sheer enjoyment. They will have questions to ask, and they will have difficulties to overcome, but not all authors ask of the reader the dull pains of drudgery.

At heart the author and the athlete are similar in their aim. Each, at times, lives with zest; each, at times, feels the thrill of strength; and each, at times, strives to express his inward power in outward form, to give "play" to his muscles or his mind. At times, it is most difficult for the author to write and write well for his reader, as it is difficult for the athlete to drive a ball clean to the boundary, to scale an unconquered peak, to hold a hard horse in rough country. Difficult--yes. But all delight makes demand upon brain and sinew. It is surely an author in poetic mood who speaks to young readers in the gypsy's ringing invitation: "Dosta, we'll go now to the tents and put on the gloves; and I'll try to make you feel what a sweet thing it is to be alive, brother."*

*From R. Maxwell's In Fealty to Apollo, Cheshire Company, Melbourne, Australia, (preface) 1966.

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